

Research Activities of Students as a Way to Prepare Them for Social Work: Adopting Foreign Experience in Ukraine

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Abstract: The article outlines some drawbacks of research training for social workers in Ukraine. To improve it, one should consider the main characteristics of such training in West European countries, given that they are exemplary in terms of social security. With the help of differential and comparative-typological analysis, the article singles out methodical aspects which social work training in Ukraine lacks and, therefore, suggests relevant recommendations for enhancing research activities of future social workers. Besides, it proves that the reforming of research training implies diversifying forms of research activities, as well as bringing them together with industrial placements and educational autonomy of students. At the same time, research activities should be a cross-cutting component in the context of applying interactive, information and project-based methods of teaching and learning. The international relevance of the article lies in identifying areas of research and related activities in the leading European countries. This can be a starting point for improving education systems in the post-Soviet countries in which there is a pronounced divergence between instructional, theoretical and research activities within social work training.

Keywords: *research activities, social workers, effective technologies, the educational process, student mobility, forms and methods of training.*

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1. Introduction

The experience of other countries shows that the field of social work is witnessing significant competition between the representatives of various social fields (social educators, social psychologists, psychoanalysts, medical and social workers). Only university graduates who are well prepared for research activities can win such a competition. Readiness for research activities is seen as an important factor in maintaining and developing the profession, as well as a way of ensuring the competitiveness of social workers in the labour market.

The problem of this particular article lies in traditional contradictions between practice and research on social problems in the post-socialist and post-Soviet countries and the relevant experience of countries with well-established democracies. The changes in social work in Ukraine and Russia, as well as other post-Soviet countries with transitional economies and developing democracies, are at a stage of conflict and “unfinished” discourse between universal social values and the political, cultural-axiological context. The latter which stands at the level of stereotypes, segregation and uncertainty of identification aspects cannot fully adjust to the level of social services in West European countries. Ukraine has only begun to view social work as a comprehensive project involving all members of the society who strive to improve the common welfare (Semigina & Boyko, 2014). The main problem is the inconsistency of social resources to be provided by policies, existing values, social work, education and social practice. The feature of social work and educational-scientific training for it in Ukraine is the significant achievements (provision of access, availability of research projects, international cooperation) and drawbacks related to the specifics of professionalization in this field (Boiko & Kabachenko, 2016). One of the key destructive reasons is the pronounced divergence between educational-scientific training and practical conditions of social practice. In this regard, it appears essential to study how West European countries manage to organize research training in social work by combining instruction, research activities and industrial placements of future specialists who are to meet the social needs of the population.

As noted by Horishna & Slozanska (2017), Ukrainian universities often offer social work as part of double degrees, which only worsens the problem. This dualism assumes that social work is only an additional service in the context of psychological or pedagogical services. Besides, the above-mentioned double-degree programmes remain far from ideal.

In addition to actual educational problems with implementing innovative forms of training, some researchers focus on regional traditions and trends in social services. Hugman (2009) claims that the profession can maintain and further develop a coherent broad identity by recognizing diversity. “Countries of the “global North”, where modern social work first began to professionalize, can gain by considering development of different ‘authentic’ forms of social work in the “global South” (Hugman, 2009). The main discussion should be the focus of social work on “micro” or “macro” issues (Hugman, 2009). In this case, Ukraine can be attributed to “the global South”, where the social sphere as a separate form of public consciousness and activity began to professionalize only later and, therefore, remains in a restrictive environment of traditions and stereotypes. All this hinders the integration of all related fields, namely, politics, education, practice and personal motivation.

One must admit that social work training depends on social traditions and state social security. In Scandinavian countries, there is “the predominance of universal non-discriminating welfare programmes”, which can be explained by “the high degree of economic equality and the low level of patronage and corruption” (Rothstein & Stolle, 2003). This makes Scandinavia one of the best examples of social work and education. Still, social problems of the post-Soviet countries lie not so much in education as in levels of general wealth. Thus, it is important to consider the general economic and social background of Ukraine that is not yet able to maintain economic aspects of full-fledged social support.

Therefore, the main drawbacks and epistemological contradictions in research activities of future social workers in Ukraine are the following:

1. The lack of pragmatic and practice-oriented links between theoretical training, industrial placements and research activities.
2. The conflict between traditional (lectures, seminars) and innovative (individualized and project-based learning) approaches.
3. The predominance of centralized education planning which blocks practice-oriented initiatives on a local level (non-autonomy of universities in planning research activities and close cooperation with institutions providing social services).

Since 2014, Ukraine has been pursuing a course of pro-European development, which should primarily affect the field of the humanities. Thus, it is indeed crucial to study the experience of the leading European countries in organizing research activities to formulate effective recommendations for improving social work training in Ukraine.

Research methods include analysis, generalization and differential selection of educational-scientific aspects of social work training in Scandinavia, Germany and the UK as exemplary countries in terms of social security. Also, it was important to conduct a comparative-typological analysis of education content and goals, as well as to forecast and model education reforms in Ukraine, taking into account the experience studied.

The article aims to single out educational-scientific aspects of these countries' experience to improve research training of future social workers in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ukraine.

Concerning ethical aspects, the authors of the article work relied only on their own experience of analyzing general educational conditions and fragments of education content.

2. Higher Education in the Scandinavian Countries

Preparing social workers for research activities is one of the priorities of HEIs in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Germany. In the Scandinavian countries, bachelor's degree programmes in social work, designed for 3-3.5 years, encourage future social workers to obtain scientific knowledge in the field of social work and its research and develop creative skills. They should be able to analyze social processes and problems at different levels (Lund University, 2018). Therefore, they are offered to study the following courses:

- “Developing Knowledge of Social Work” (Lund University, 2018): this course provides students with relevant information about scientific methods in social research; besides, it covers issues such as the concept of scientific knowledge and research; methods and organization of social research; methods for measuring social characteristics; statistical methods for evaluating research practices;

- “Scientific Theory, Research and Elaboration of Research Methods in Social Work” (University of Southern Denmark, Aalborg and Aarhus Universities) and “Theory of Science, Methods of Social Sciences and Ethics” (University College of Lillehammer, Norway).

It is important to note that bachelor's degree programmes require students to write a dissertation so that they can acquire the necessary research skills.

At the same time, master's degree programmes involve more thorough training for research. The Northern University (Norway) offers the following research-oriented courses: “Analytical Comparison of Social Learning”, “Quantitative Methods”, “Qualitative Methods”.

The course on Analytical Comparison of Social Learning is aimed at teaching students to use critical and analytical approaches and analyze works of other researchers, as well as their own. It provides future specialists with the knowledge they can use to plan their research and implement the necessary links between methodology, theory and empirical research. Also, the course covers a critical selection of international statistics on social work, a review of the relevant literature with a comparative analysis of social learning and ethical dilemmas in research on social work. Importantly, students learn to formulate research problems, conduct qualitative studies and comparative research (qualitative and quantitative), as well as develop adequate (appropriate) methodologies (Lohvynenko, 2016).

The course on Quantitative Methods familiarizes students with the methods of statistical analysis of social processes and phenomena. At the same time, the course on Qualitative Methods is associated with qualitative research methods and technologies (interviews, learning experiences, talks).

In the Scandinavian countries, HEIs offer joint master's degree programmes. In particular, the programme "European Master in Social Work with Families and Children (MFamily)" is offered by an international university consortium of four partner educational institutions. They are the University Institute of Lisbon (Portugal), the University of Gothenburg (Sweden), the University of Stavanger (Norway) and Makerere University (Kampala, Uganda) (Lohvynenko, 2016).

Similar curricula may include such courses as Methodology of Social Research, Research Theories and Methods, as well as a master's dissertation.

Practical training in social agencies plays an essential role in professional training of future social workers. As noted by Lohvynenko (2016), this experience is aimed at deepening and strengthening students' professional and personal competencies by motivating them to solve intercultural (international) social problems and issues of social development.

3. Attempts of German Researchers to Develop New and Effective Approaches

German researchers are actively working on the latest approaches, as well as innovative forms and methods of research training. Busse & Mansfield (1984) propose to organize an academic discipline in the form of a closed cycle:

- a lecture: determining the scope of independent work based on some specific educational material and examples of tasks; a brief theoretical overview to explain the type of tasks and ways of performing them;
- preliminary independent work: reading a lecture; taking notes; using a textbook to deepen and consolidate knowledge; performing typical tasks;
- a practical class: discussing the main aspects of the lecture; revising educational material; discussing significant mistakes and errors; monitoring knowledge and providing assistance in finding solutions; working with reference books and other supporting materials;
- preliminary and secondary independent work: reflecting on the tasks discussed in practical classes; solving additional tasks (revision); re-reading and supplementing lecture notes (summary, self-control, consolidation);
- a lecture.

The researchers also note that oral instructions are not enough for most students to achieve the requirements for independent work. Therefore, textbooks should have the following structure: the examples of lecture notes for the first months of study; adequate educational goals; methodical recommendations for analyzing the references; a set of tasks with instructions for their performance (Busse & Mansfield, 1984).

In Germany, they tend to acquaint students with the features of research activities from the first years of higher education study. Thus, it has become a tradition at the beginning of the first semester to introduce students to the methods and techniques of intellectual work, research methods, the specifics of higher education, the peculiarities of the educational process, the organization of independent work and the ways of analyzing the references. Some universities organize seminars which familiarize students with the basic concepts of certain research-related courses (e.g., The Language of the Specialty), as well as with methodological problems of learning and research. All activities related to teaching research methods are connected with the real educational process and the specific requirements for students in a particular university.

The University of Weimar offers an introductory course (similar to Introduction to the Profession), which aims to facilitate students' adaptation to learning conditions. This course involves a general overview of educational tasks and defining sections of the profession and boosts students' motivation towards the chosen profession. Different activities within the course allow university teachers to differentiate students based on their readiness towards learning.

Quite noteworthy is a model of practice-oriented training in HEIs in Germany. This model is implemented during basic training and acquaints

students with professional activities due to introductory classes throughout the first year of study. Also, it involves the use of business games in the second semester and educational trips to practice premises. During the following semesters, students learn how to establish close professional contacts with relevant specialists. Business games make it possible to model professional situations and familiarize students with the basics of professional activities under the supervision of their tutors.

Practical classes in small groups (10-12 students) aim to consolidate and deepen students' knowledge, develop their critical thinking and learner autonomy. When working in such groups, students are entitled to choose research material. It helps one to create an informal atmosphere, enhance interaction and use different teaching methods.

It must be noted that German, US and UK universities tend to include postgraduate students in research groups of undergraduate students. It is the so-called interdisciplinary method, which allows research group members to exchange views using comments and recommendations of scientific supervisors and colleagues, as well as discover and formulate original ways of solving a scientific problem. However, the role of scientific supervisors is changing. Indeed, they become members of such groups and seek solutions to topical problems together with others based on their experience.

Wider opportunities for students' participation in independent research come with various forms of practical training, term papers and dissertations. Grades for the results of practical training serve as a criterion for a graduate's readiness for research activities. It is rather common in Germany, where the first and second stages of practical training introduce students to the profession. The third stage of practical training allows them to choose a field of research interest.

Considering the defence of a dissertation as an effective tool for successful research, scholars strive to develop additional measures to increase the significance of dissertations. These measures are much related to the concepts, methodological approaches and strategies of research. A dissertation can be viewed as comprehensive independent research.

Another form of student involvement in research activities is blended learning. It means that during the entire period of study or since choosing the specialization, students can combine training with part-time employment, namely, a week of study - a week of work; a semester of study - a semester of work. This type of training is called a sandwich course (Göhringer, 2002; Kay, 1990).

Higher education abroad offers different forms of monitoring students' research activities. First of all, such monitoring covers all forms of

training, including tutorials and independent work. However, it mostly concerns seminars, practical classes and special forms of independent research work and tutorials.

One should pay special attention to tutorials since they make it possible to identify, assess and give precise instructions for further work. They complement the educational process and serve as a type of assistance and one of the pillars of students' knowledge acquisition.

More and more educators and psychologists are showing interest in creating tutorial programmes for students. Such programmes follow the principle of identifying potential abilities for self-development and self-actualization. Tutorials should follow a careful procedure for selecting a tutor; systematic classes; constant supervision of student tutors by professor tutors. Both quick and average students can be tutors provided that they are informal group leaders. It is especially important to note that tutorial tasks, in addition to informative issues, also include psychological aspects. Academic tutorials are also common and designed for small groups of students engaged in research activities (Ratner, 1997).

Tutorials are systematically held before or during classes. They cover such issues as planning work, setting goals for individual educational stages or sections of training, choosing research methods for mastering educational material, preparing abstracts and discussion reports, conducting experiments. Tutorials act as an incentive for scientific cooperation between university teachers and students. Moreover, they are a significant resource and a form of intensive individual contact since they allow future specialists to improve their skills in independent work.

In many European HEIs, social work training focuses on the conscious acquisition of educational material and the development of logical thinking and creative skills. It implies the use of both traditional and active forms of training (lectures, interviews, workshops, seminars, business games, analyzing situations).

In Germany, seminars are considered to be a more important form of training than lectures. Their mission is to teach students to apply research methods in practice. There are also beginner's seminars (an introductory stage), seminars and upper seminars (special seminars). Engaging students in free group discussions, they develop students' scientific thinking, stimulate their learner autonomy, encourage them to discuss relevant issues and discover effective solutions to them.

The Dresden University of Technology has been conducting seminars in the form of a scientific discussion for many years. These seminars involve searching and discovering optimal arguments. It means that

students need to find reasonable arguments to prove the hypothesis. Scientific discussions show whether students have acquired the necessary knowledge during independent work and can apply it in practice.

Since the 1970s, the same university has been holding beginner's seminars for second-year students. They take place in the form of reports on independently studied additional material. Thus, students become the actors in the educational process. Many German universities engage students in conducting lectures. Such innovation has a significant impact on the quality and the structure of the educational process, as evidenced by practical experience and results of pedagogical research.

A discussion seminar is the most common in educational practice abroad. Many researchers note the following advantages: they help students to understand a scientific problem better since the information of each participant is supplemented by that from others; they contribute to studying various aspects of the problem under discussion; they reveal new, often unexpected ideas; they enable the participants to critically express, accept or reject others' assumptions; they make it possible to adjust proposals to form a group opinion or solve a problem (Gerasymova et al., 2019; Maksymchuk et al., 2020; Melnyk et al., 2019; Nerubasska & Maksymchuk, 2020; Sheremet et al., 2019; Onishchuk et al., 2020; Otroshchenko, 2010; Savelchuk, 2019).

Seminars outside the institution and field classes are a special type of interdisciplinary seminars, whose main purpose is to activate students' cognitive interests and involve them in research activities. They are designed for the whole semester and are usually held in two stages. At the first stage, the participants familiarize themselves with the activities of a social institution or agency within the university. At the second stage, classes are held directly in the organization under study. Students need to write an essay on a topic of their choice, related to the problem of the seminar.

Foreign HEIs are in a constant search for extracurricular forms of training aimed at developing the creative potential of young people. In Germany, these are creative research groups of students operating on a non-profit basis. They involve practical training for senior students on small research projects. All proceeds go to pay for student work, organizational costs, communications, international contacts. It was the Free University of Berlin that first introduced this form of research training for students. Other European universities promote the AIESEC network which aims to organize introductory practice and industrial placements of students.

The students who participate in research activities also need to meet special requirements for student attainment. It implies participation in special lectures and seminars (Steilkurse in Germany), practical classes,

practical training, special advanced courses. Interestingly, such lectures consist of certain blocks or are held in the form of “review sessions”.

At the same time, research projects involve the use of such methods as group therapy, “the aquarium”, modelling, “the basket technique”, incident resolution (the Piger method), gradual acquaintance with the case and dynamic situational methods. All these methods are aimed at solving specific problems in science and industry.

4. Research Training of Social Workers in the UK Higher Education

Research training of future social workers occupies a leading place in the UK higher education. There is a transition to a new research paradigm of education, which lies in reconsidering its content and areas in the implementation of new ideas. It acts as a axiological guideline for developing the current system of the UK education (Borg, 2010, p. 73).

Today, the UK education system organizes research activities of students and university teachers in different areas: 1) research conducted by students; 2) research conducted by teaching staff; 3) joint research of students and university teachers; 4) research-oriented courses for students; 5) cultivation of research culture among students (Borg, 2010).

Emphasis is placed on the problem of combining learning and research activities. According to Griffiths (2004), the “teaching-research” concept can be considered in the context of the following positions: research-led teaching, which is mainly based on traditional teaching approaches focused on scientific results rather than the very process of obtaining them; research-oriented teaching, which pays much attention to the development of students’ research skills and research culture; research-based teaching is focused on students’ search activities rather than the transmission of ready-made knowledge to future specialists; research-informed teaching serves as a chain of systematic search to develop and implement innovative experiences and projects (p. 117).

In the UK, degree programmes on social work are aimed at developing students’ readiness for research activities from the first year of study. The students who engage in the research life early are more motivated to learn and demonstrate well-developed interdisciplinary competencies. They realize their career prospects, have a strong sense of professional identity and strive for continuing professional development. Such a learning system provides students with unique opportunities to expand the range of professional and research skills.

British educators have developed two strategies for the implementation of research training (algorithmic and creative). The

algorithmic strategy involves mastering organizational aspects and interdisciplinary methods. At the same time, one widely uses problem- and search-based types of learning. The creative strategy requires certain research experience, reflective skills, as well as abilities to solve non-standard research tasks. It uses such methods as an expert assessment, case studies and preparation of reports, reviews and abstracts.

The development of research skills in future social workers begins with the identification of motives for research (stage 1). Subsequently, students justify their choice of a particular research area during interviews with relevant experts (stage 2). Next, they formulate a research plan (stage 3). At stages 4 and 5, they collect the necessary scientific information to analyze a particular social problem and solve it. At stage 6, future researchers present their findings via research projects and participate in their critical discussion.

In the UK, curricula are based on certain modules. They usually consist of five or six modules, whose obligatory component lies in conducting independent research, preparing a research project and writing a dissertation. Master's degree programmes may include the following compulsory modules: 1) independent study (30 credits); 2) research skills (30 credits); 3) research project or dissertation (60 credits) (Povidaichyk et al., 2017).

At the same time, research training takes place during theoretical and practical training, as well as during extracurricular activities (meetings with practitioners and leading scholars, trips, conferences, internships, independent research). Of great importance is independent work, during which students develop research and self-reflection skills and become more independent learners. The value of educational autonomy lies in students' awareness of the personal significance of the acquired knowledge, which allows them to implement new projects independently (Little, 1991, p. 95).

Practical training is a leading form of research training for future social workers. It is important to note that mentoring is also common in the UK education system. Students can observe how various specialists, tutors, mentors work and cooperate with them. It enables students to develop their professional and personal qualities, boosts their self-esteem and promotes the reflection and creation of their professional style. Mentors are highly qualified specialists who act as an example to students when performing their professional functions. Teacher training programmes require university teachers to be ready to support students in learning, participate in the development and planning of classes and training programmes, create an effective learning environment, assess students' personal development and integrate research and teaching (Povidaichyk et al., 2017).

It must be noted that research training in UK universities encompasses various technologies (problem-based learning; focused learning; interactive learning; information and communication technologies; group work). The most common method is case studies, which are often combined with brainstorming sessions, group discussions and debates. Classroom training includes lectures, work in small groups, seminars (scientific, problematic), training sessions (Hammond, 2002; Harkin et al., 2001).

5. Prospects of Introducing the West European Experience in Ukraine

The introduction of the Scandinavian experience to optimize research activities of students in Ukraine suggest the close integration of teaching and research training. They both involve the use of traditional and active teaching methods, such as group work, discussions, problem-based learning, debates, conferences. Besides, one should pay considerable attention to the organization of independent work, as well as the use of active forms of learning (problem-based and summary lectures, seminars and practical classes). They encourage students to apply the obtained knowledge in practice, show initiative and autonomy, search for creative solutions to topical problems and tasks. It must be noted, however, that research activities go along with theoretical and practical activities in terms of content and purpose.

In the Scandinavian countries, degree programmes aim to develop the necessary knowledge and skills in the field of theory and methods of social work with the specified category of people. They meet local and international standards. At the same time, the following goals are relevant to Ukraine: to acquaint students with comparative studies so that they can critically assess the strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the European and international models of social work and social policy, which is changing in different parts of the world; to motivate future social workers to conduct independent research in the intercultural context.

The authors of the article believe that several interesting ideas of the above-mentioned German experience can be used in research training of social workers. They are as follows: introducing research training at the first year of higher education study; recognizing independent work as a determining resource for the effectiveness of research activities; conducting research activities in small groups; organizing tutorials during the implementation of research projects; holding lectures in the form of a closed cycle, as well as discussion seminars and field classes.

The German model of research training in years 3 and 4 is indeed innovative as it is based on research projects. They allow one to find independent solutions to a real problem based on an interdisciplinary

approach. At the same time, problem-based learning combines independent work with classes in small research groups, which ensures rapid involvement in research activities and scientific creativity.

The UK experience of social work training also appears to be rather promising for Ukraine. Here are some of its positive ideas that can be used by the Ukrainian education system: to increase the requirements for selecting university teachers who can prepare researchers effectively; to introduce the strategy for the gradual development of research skills into the educational process; to ensure the elaboration of research-based training courses; to apply the latest technologies, forms and methods of teaching and learning; to use extracurricular activities extensively.

Thus, readiness for research activities is seen as an important factor in preserving and developing social work training, as well as a way of ensuring competitiveness of social workers in the labour market. Research training of future social workers in the specified countries is characterized by the following features: the incorporation of the research component in degree programmes; the practical focus of the training; the use of advanced technologies, forms and methods; the supplementation of practical training with the experimental-analytical component. The findings once again show that the training of future social workers in HEIs abroad follows the following general trends: humanization; fundamentalization; informatization of social education; academic mobility of students; the focus on practice-oriented training; the use of advanced technologies, forms and methods and training future social workers for research activities.

6. Conclusions

Therefore, the main recommendations for improving Ukrainian education are as follows:

1) it is essential to boost readiness of social workers for research activities through the following forms: research units included in general and special courses, research projects, research focus of practical training;

2) the mentioned approaches should be implemented through the module-based organization of the educational process and its various modifications, whose system-forming link is independent work (or learning autonomy) of students and practical training which creates particularly favourable conditions for developing research skills;

3) it is important to organize professionally-oriented extracurricular activities (meetings with leading scholars, research internships and grants for students, participation in scientific conferences and seminars);

4) theoretical and practical training should involve the use of effective technologies (interactive, informational, project-related), forms and methods (problem-based lectures, closed-loop lectures, problem-based seminars, consultations and mutual consultations, case studies, distance and blended learning, modelling, natural learning, instructions, teamwork, group project work, gaming methods), tools (electronic textbooks, interactive whiteboards).

Research limitations. This article highlights some ways of how to improve professional training of future social workers in Ukraine based on a general analysis of the West European experience. To validate the mentioned recommendations, one should conduct extensive research and obtain relevant experimental confirmations.

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